

# The “priests” of East Cape: A religious movement on the Chukchi Peninsula during the 1920s and 1930s

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Volume 31, numéro 1-2, 2007

Tchoukotka  
Chukotka

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019714ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/019714ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)  
1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Schweitzer, P. P. & Golovko, E. V. (2007). The “priests” of East Cape: A religious movement on the Chukchi Peninsula during the 1920s and 1930s. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 31(1-2), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.7202/019714ar>

Résumé de l'article

Les récentes possibilités de mener des travaux de terrain en Sibérie ont permis non seulement l'étude des processus sociaux et culturels actuels mais ont également facilité le réexamen des changements sociaux rapides des périodes antérieures. L'une de ces périodes était, sans aucun doute, la décennie qui a suivi la révolution russe, quand les Russes et d'autres étrangers ont accru sensiblement leur impact dans plusieurs régions de la Sibérie. Un travail de terrain mené dans les années 1990 a permis d'attester un phénomène jusque-là méconnu, à savoir l'existence d'un système syncrétique de vision du monde et de pratiques rituelles dans le village yupik sibérien de Naukan. Comparable à ce qui est appelé ailleurs «mouvements de revitalisation», il peut être interprété comme une réaction à une pression coloniale de plus en plus forte. Cet article tente de situer le mouvement de Naukan dans son contexte culturel et politique afin de donner une lecture post-coloniale des transformations du début du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle.

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**Abstract:** The “priests” of East Cape: A religious movement on the Chukchi Peninsula during the 1920s and 1930s

Recently broadened fieldwork opportunities in Siberia have not only enabled the study of current social and cultural processes, but also facilitated a re-assessment of previous periods of rapid social change. One of those was, undoubtedly, the decade following the Russian Revolution, when Russians and other outsiders significantly increased their impact in many areas of Siberia. Fieldwork conducted during the 1990s has provided evidence of a previously unrecognised phenomenon, namely the existence of a syncretistic system of worldview and ritual practice in the Siberian Yupik village Naukan. Similar to so-called “revitalisation movements” elsewhere, it can be interpreted as a reaction to increasing Russian colonial pressure. The present paper attempts to situate the Naukan movement in its cultural and political contexts, in order to provide a post-colonial reading of early 20th century transformations.

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## Introduction

This paper is based on field research conducted by the authors in various Bering Strait communities during the years 1993-1996. We were working on a project entitled "Traveling Between Continents," which documented travels and other contacts across Bering Strait before 1948. In the course of our interviews, a number of different subjects came up, more or less related to our central topic. In one of these conversations, in September of 1993, the Uelen resident Nikolay Ivanovich Yaken (of Naukan Yupik descent) unexpectedly started to talk about issues seemingly unrelated to contacts across Bering Strait. What we learned instead was that—in the late 1920s and early 1930s—the Yupik village of Naukan, situated at the farthest northeast point of the Chukchi Peninsula, where the Russian side of the Bering Strait comes closest to reaching its American counterpart, may have been home to a newly emerging religious movement. When describing the leaders of this movement, Yaken referred to these individuals as "priests." Here is an excerpt from that interview:

The collective farms were established in the 30s and initially local people did not want to join. You know, we had shamans and even priests. I saw they were sewing some gowns from black cloth. One of the priests was Kantaggun, then there was Aminak—a woman—and the third one was Nunegnilan. Nunegnilan was a shaman first and then he became a priest. They gathered every Sunday and invited other people. They did not go hunting themselves. And the people who believed came to them and brought meat and blubber. Once I entered their *yaranga* ('tent'). They were wearing long black gowns with big sleeves. They put them on only on Sundays. One of them had a white handkerchief in his hands; he was walking around the *yaranga*, murmuring something. They did not want kids go to school nor use soap when washing. They used to organise dances in their *yaranga* after their "talks." Once my elder brother did not go to hunt because of bad weather. And he decided to go and see what they were doing in there. My brother was widely respected. When the chief border guard came to Naukan, he stayed at my brother's *yaranga*. And so my brother entered the priests' *yaranga*. And one of them, on seeing him, said, "Oh, I feel dizzy; I can feel the Russian smell. Kick him out" (Nikolay Ivanovich Yaken 1993).

Yaken (this was his Yupik name which later became his last name) also provided an explanation for these phenomena:

They picked it up from Americans. They used to go to the other side [*i.e.* Alaska]. And many people worked on whaling ships [...]. The priests had self-made crosses on their breasts. Many people believed them. I guess about 30% of the village. I seldom came up close to them. I went to school, and they hated those who attended school (Nikolay Ivanovich Yaken 1993).

Yaken was born in Naukan around 1922 and died in Uelen in 1994. Yaken's birth date provides us with a rough clue as to when he encountered the priests at East Cape: since he was a schoolboy then, it could not have happened earlier than the late 1920s. While we do not know exactly for how long he attended school, we can assume that he was out of school not later than by the mid-1930s. Let us now take a closer look at the excerpt and the "priests" Yaken described in the interview. Clearly, they have some features in common with Christian religious functionaries, or priests: they wore long

black gowns with big sleeves; they wore crosses across their chests; they held services and sermons ("talks") on Sundays; they were preaching (or "murmuring"); they had a kind of church building (*i.e.* all services were held inside); services included walking and reading (from a "white handkerchief"). On the other hand, a number of other details are difficult to reconcile with particular Christian or Native traditions. First of all, one of the priests was a woman, which would be a flagrant violation of Russian Orthodox and Catholic traditions (but it would not be unusual for shamans).

The priests never went to hunt themselves and accepted gifts from hunters. However, most resident missionaries in the Arctic tried to take part in hunting—most shamans were active hunters too, although they typically received gifts in exchange for their services. The priests disapproved of going to school and of learning to read. However, most missionaries did teach reading and writing. The priests seemingly disapproved of using soap in personal hygiene—this is most certainly the exact opposite of what missionaries taught.

Finally, there are a number of elements in the narrative which express an outspoken anti-Russian and—even more broadly—anti-Western attitude. The obvious aversion to "Russian smell" and the disapproval of school attendance and soap use deserve to be mentioned in that context. Finally, the assertion that the priests had a following of almost one third of the total village population may be an indication of a "movement" and not just of idiosyncratic actions by individual community members.

It appears that we are dealing here with a religious movement of syncretistic nature with strong anti-Russian (or anti-Western) overtones. Our interlocutor was undoubtedly right in suggesting that the occurrences he had witnessed in Naukan did not take place without influences from Alaska. Therefore, in order to understand the circumstances which possibly gave rise to these events, we must examine not only the contemporary ethnographic setting of Naukan, but also the broader socio-political climate around Bering Strait at the time. This article considers the possibility of interpreting the 1930s developments in Naukan as a "revitalisation movement," a term initially suggested by Anthony Wallace (1956), in the context of addressing issues of culture change from an organismic perspective. More recently, Marjorie Balzer (1999) has documented revitalisation phenomena in other Siberian contexts that may be comparable to what Yaken shared with us, and Michael Harkin (2004) spearheaded a kind of rehabilitation of the term. Thus, prior to interpreting the emergence of the so-called "Naukan priests," we first delve into a general characterisation of revitalisation movements. Subsequently, we consider how the information provided by Yaken fits within the broader social milieu of the Bering Strait. For the latter, the historical aspects that appear to be particularly relevant are the state of missionary activities and shamanic practices in the region, the interethnic relations in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as certain social changes inflicted by the establishment of the Soviet regime in Chukotka.

## Revitalisation movements

During the 1930s, American anthropology turned its attention to issues of culture change and "acculturation" studies (e.g., Redfield *et al.* 1936). The brief memorandum by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits—which was actually more of a manifesto of how to define and study acculturation—set the stage for a broad agenda of studying the processes, mechanisms, and results of a particular class of culture change phenomena. Linton later refined this work by identifying "nativistic movements" as an important subset of acculturation phenomena, defining them as "any conscious, organised attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture" (Linton 1943: 230).

Anthony Wallace's 1956 article entitled "Revitalisation Movements" established the term, suggesting it as an encompassing label covering phenomena such as "nativistic movements," "cargo cults" and "social movements." Wallace's broad understanding of the term defined "revitalisation movements" as "a deliberate, organised, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 1956: 265). In contrast to Linton, for Wallace these movements are not about "reviving or perpetuating selected aspects of a culture" but about constructing "a more satisfying culture" (*ibid.*). Also, whereas Linton (1943) attempted primarily a typology of nativistic movements—he distinguished four forms of movements using two binary oppositions: revivalistic versus perpetuative nativism, and magical versus rational nativism—Wallace's approach focuses on the intentionality of revitalisation strides. Thus what distinguishes revitalisation from other forms of social transitions is that it is a conscious effort, made by individuals who identify themselves as members of a cultural whole, but are for one reason or another unsatisfied with the *status quo*. Such innovators typically endeavour not to introduce or eliminate particular ideas and practices, but to transform the entire system. It is worth noting that while considering a greater diversity of traits that could mark a cultural expression as a "revitalisation movement," Wallace is still more inclined toward psychological rather than social explanations. In his view, it is deep-seated, society-wide psychological stress, derived from the total incompatibility between the existing cognitive structures and powerful exogenous forces that serves as a catalyst of culture change.

Despite Wallace's claim that revitalisation movements include most social and religious movements (and a good share of culture change phenomena), the term "revitalisation movements" became primarily associated with movements among North American Indians. One reason for that is certainly that Wallace's major revitalisation study deals with the Handsome Lake movement among the Iroquois (Wallace 1969). Still, this is not too problematic for our purposes, since the experiences of Indigenous groups are of primary relevance to us. The available investigations reveal a number of conditions which, combined, seem to provide a kind of "breeding ground" for the formation of the social movements in question. The list of such circumstances includes strong external pressure to change arising in the context of rapid, and often callous, colonisation; abrupt transformation of social status for all members of an Indigenous population; disruption of a familiar way of life and loss of values regarded as



traditional; a wide range of numerous and fast-paced occurrences previously not experienced by the group; and at least some degree of ideological imposition that threatens the identity of a people as a whole, causing all-encompassing psychological stress.

After the 1970s, Wallace's approach to studying such movements, and more generally to study processes of culture change, lost its prominence in American anthropology; in the subsequent heydays of post-modernism related phenomena such as "cargo cults" were reduced to projections of Western desires (e.g., Lindstrom 1993). More recently, though, Wallace's notion seems to have been "revitalised." On the one hand, Balzer (1999: 75) applied the concept to her Western Siberian material, declaring the "revitalisation of an anthropological term." On the other hand, Harkin's (2004) tries to view Native North American phenomena—the *locus classicus* of revitalisation movements—and Melanesian "cargo cults" through the unifying lens of "revitalisation movements." We follow Balzer's lead of adding Siberia to the mix and concur with Harkin that the notion of "revitalisation movements" is characterised by "remediable problems" (Harkin 2004: xxxv) and deserves to be explored instead of being outright discarded. Finally, Cave's (2006) recent study of Native American prophet movements uses the notion of "revitalisation movements" without much ado and in direct reference to Wallace's 1956 article (Cave 2006: 6-7).

### **Revitalisation and other religious movements in the circumpolar North**

In contrast to Melanesia and Native North America, our documentary record of similar movements throughout the circumpolar North is rather slim. Regarding Greenland, the best documented case is the 18th century Habakuk movement (e.g., Gad 1982: 324-342; Kleivan 1984: 597; Söderberg 1974), while the Gabriel movement of the 1850s (Townsend 1984: 47-48) and the case of Inequnarneq at Tasiussaq (Kleivan 1986) have received much less scholarly treatment. The situation is better in eastern Canada, thanks primarily to the efforts of Frédéric Laugrand, Jarich Oosten and collaborators who have embarked on the ambitious project of documenting "the transition to Christianity" (Oosten and Laugrand 1999) in recent years (see also, Blaisel *et al.* 1999; Laugrand 2002; Laugrand *et al.* 2006; Oosten *et al.* 2006). Other eastern Canadian case studies include movements at Leaf River in 1931 (Grant 1997) and North Baffin Island in 1946 (Trott 1997). While Alaska is not well-documented at all (see Townsend 1984 for the best available overview), the situation is slightly better in Siberia. A number of local movements in western Siberia have been documented recently (Balzer 1999; Leete 1998, 2004), and the Amur region was treated in an earlier study (Koz'minskiy 1927). None of the Siberian cases mentioned led to such visible results as the so-called Burkhanism among the Altaians (e.g., Danilin 1993; Krader 1956). Throughout the Arctic, the small-scale character of local societies might have prevented larger movements<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Laestonianism in northern Fennoscandia is possibly an exception in this respect, if we consider the revivalist and Sami aspects of the movement (e.g., Björklund 1992).

Apart from the issue of documentation, it is interesting to observe what different kinds of terminologies have been employed to denote these religious movements. While Grant (1997) speaks of "religious fanaticism," Leete (2004) sees "resistance movements" (with religious aspects), and Kleivan (1986) "socioreligious" movements. Townsend (1984) uses "revitalisation movement," "millennial movements," "revivalist movement," "Native proseletysed Christian-like movement," etc., without clearly distinguishing between them. Seemingly, many of these authors do not attach much theoretical significance to their choice of terminology when referring to the movements in question. The exception to this rule is Blaisel *et al.* (1999: 371) which contains an argument as to why the authors chose to use the notion of "parousial" rather than "messianic" movements. We will revisit the issue of terminology later; for now, we will turn the readers' attention to the Bering Strait region.

### **Social setting around the Bering Strait in the first half of the 20th century**

The Indigenous peoples residing on the two sides of Bering Strait have been part of a single system of exchanges for a long time, at least until cross-border travel between Alaska and Chukotka became more or less impossible in the late 1940s. Today, these populations are generally referred to as "Eskimo" (or "Inuit") and "coastal Chukchi," although this categorisation somewhat obscures the linguistic and cultural diversity existing within each group. Linguistically, the Eskimo populations of the Bering Strait area are grouped into "Inupiaq" (plural Inupiat) and "Yupik," and the latter are further divided into "Siberian Yupik" (plural Yupiget) and "Naukan Yupik" (plural Yupiit). Inupiaq people currently occupy the coast of Alaska and the island of Little Diomedé. In former times they also inhabited Big Diomedé, now a domain of the Russian Federation, and more recently King Island, which was being vacated in the 1960s and 1970s with the majority of residents relocating to Nome. The Yupik people living in the area pertaining to our inquiry occupied the village of Naukan (referenced under the name of "East Cape" in a number of English-language sources) through 1958, until it was forcibly closed by the Soviet government; other groups of Yupiget resided and reside further south on the Chukchi Peninsula. The contemporary settlements whose population is predominantly Chukchi are most numerous on the Peninsula, and are dispersed both north and south of the now abandoned site of Naukan.

### ***Regional and cross-cultural contacts***

The long-standing contacts between the different Indigenous groups of the Bering Strait region were, and to some extent continue to be, motivated by various types of social relationships, including kinship ties (Golovko and Schweitzer 2001; Schweitzer and Golovko 1995a, 1995b, 1997). Regional influences were never restricted to just one side or the other: marriages, economic exchanges, travel and social visits, as well as warfare, were conducted, quite literally, between the continents. As one would expect, engulfed by the colonising nation-states, these relationships could not be permanently locked within the historically traditional frameworks of the Indigenous

communities. The impact of the colonial powers can be traced through the national differences imposed by the border regime which were further amplified by the ideological disagreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. On an official level, the Soviet authorities did not start regulating the ongoing contacts between the Alaskan and Chukotkan sides of the Bering Strait until 1938, over 20 years after the Socialist Revolution of 1917. Even then, however, the cross-Beringian travels did not pose a significant enough threat as to warrant an immediate closure of the border. A special 1938 memorandum of the USSR Consulate in Washington, D.C., merely stipulates simplified check-point procedures, requiring border guards to write down the names of individuals heading for the other side and to perform a head count upon their return. Contacts were brought to a full halt in 1948, at the beginning of the Cold War, when the Soviet government informed the U.S. Department of State of the new border policies and the latter did not object<sup>2</sup>. The information, by the way, was not related to the local authorities in Alaska in a timely manner, resulting in the arrest of 17 Little Diomed residents—who had set out on their usual summer journey toward Chukotka—in the summer of 1948; the travellers were eventually released after having been detained on Big Diomed Island for almost two months (Krauss 1994: 369). It took more than 40 years after this traumatic incident, until 1989, for the Indigenous residents of the Bering Strait region to regain the right to visa-free travel between the two shores.

### ***Christian missionaries in the Bering Strait region***

The eastern parts of the Chukchi Peninsula (where Naukan is located) remained largely outside of the range of missionary activities well into the 20th century. Despite the fact that the first attempts by the Russian Orthodox Church to christianise the Chukchi reach back to the early 18th century (Bogoras 1904-09: 723), there were few visible results by the mid-19th century (Znamenski 1999: 161-162). The few reported conversions occurred at annual trade fairs (such as on the Little Anyuy River) and seemingly were primarily prompted by the gifts (shirts and tobacco) the missionaries distributed (*ibid.*: 163). Even the most prominent missionary among the Chukchi, Andrey Argentov, who resided in Chaun Bay for nine years (1848-1857), made little if any progress (Bogoras 1904-09: 724-725). Argentov supposedly fled the area when his Chukchi friend insisted on the practice of spouse exchange (*ibid.*). During the 1890s, when Vladimir Bogoraz lived and travelled among the Chukchi, the monk Father Venedict was the only missionary to conduct a two-year journey along the coastal villages on the Arctic and Pacific oceans (during which he might have visited Naukan). Nevertheless, according to Bogoraz, Venedict was primarily occupied with survival and had little time “to spread the Gospel” (Bogoras 1904-09: 729). The diakon Mikhail Petelin, a Creole<sup>3</sup> from Alaska, made an extensive trip through the interior and coastal areas of Chukotka in 1902, during which he distributed crosses and baptised “52 native

<sup>2</sup> See Golovko and Schweitzer (2004: 114-119) for both the 1938 Memorandum and the 1948 document.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of the Russian American Company (1799-1867), descendants of mixed marriages between Russian men and Native women in Alaska were officially designated as “Creoles” (see Wrangell 1980 [1839]; for more details see also Vakhtin *et al.* 2004: 109-114).



souls" (Znamenski 1999: 168). The unsatisfying results of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Chukchi Peninsula led the Holy Synod in 1906 to incorporate the peninsula into the Alaskan diocese (Znamenski 1999: 168). Subsequently (in 1908), Innokentii, the bishop of Alaska, visited the coastal areas of Chukotka and, in 1909, he assigned the Alaskan missionary Amphilokhy and the Creole psalm reader Stefan Repin to establish a permanent mission at Ureliki in the Provideniya Bay (Znamenski 1999: 169). In 1910, Amphilokhy travelled from Ureliki toward East Cape and visited the settlements of Dezhnevo and Uelen, both located in close proximity to Naukan (Amfilokhiy 1911). According to Amphilokhy, there were 11 believers (among them six Chukchi) in Dezhnevo (Amfilokhiy 1911: 208) and eight Orthodox Chukchi in Uelen (Amfilokhiy 1911: 219)<sup>4</sup>. We do not have any information about baptised Naukan residents during the early years of the 20th century. We can assume that some Naukan Yupiit, who were in frequent contact with the people from Dezhnevo and Uelen, were familiar with some basic attributes of the Russian Orthodox Church and, maybe, that a few individual Naukan residents had been baptised.

Now let us turn to possible Alaskan (and non-Orthodox) sources of Christian influence on East Cape and surroundings. The first Protestant missionaries appeared on the Seward Peninsula during the 1890s, in conjunction with Sheldon Jackson's program of Christian education and the introduction of reindeer herding spearheaded by the same man. Two Congregationalist missionaries/teachers, William Thomas Lopp and Harrison Robertson Thornton, took residence in Cape Prince of Wales, the community closest to Naukan on the Alaskan mainland, in July of 1890 (Lopp 2001: 2). By the early 20th century, after the Nome Gold Rush, a variety of Christian denominations were represented all over the Seward Peninsula. On the whole, we find it reasonable to believe that, before too long, the early missionaries in the Bering Strait region of Alaska would not only become aware of the Indigenous population inhabiting the nearby Russian territory, but take interest in exploring some proselytising possibilities, especially once they learned that the overwhelming majority of Chukotka Native peoples had not been baptised yet. At the very least, we can be certain of the mutual awareness, if not direct acquaintance between the missionaries on Little Diomed and the residents of Big Diomed, as the summertime visits between the two islands were taking place on a nearly daily basis, weather permitting.

On Little Diomed Island, the Alaskan community geographically and socially closest to Naukan, the first school opened in 1908 (Hawkes 1913) and the first resident missionaries were Norwegian Lutherans (Bogojavlensky 1969: 42). Among them was Reverend N.F. Hoyer, the first non-Orthodox missionary to export Christianity from Alaska to the Siberian side of the Bering Strait. In October of 1922, he arrived in Little Diomed from Nome, accompanied by a married couple, Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Earnest, a certain Hans Olson, and six Indigenous people. They spent one winter on the island, during which Hoyer held school sessions and religious services (Anonymous 1923: 2).

<sup>4</sup> Some additional information about Archimandrite Amphilokhy (Vakulsky) can be found in Tarasar and Erickson (1975); e.g., that he had graduated from the Kazan Theological Academy and "was able to learn the language of the Eskimos quickly" (*ibid.*: 289) and that he made two trips to the Chukchi Peninsula in 1910, in March and August (*ibid.*: 290).

With assistance from the Indigenous people, Hoyer attempted to translate *The Book of Mathew* into Inupiaq using the alphabet that he himself developed. Sunday services were even attended by residents from Big Diomed Island (*ibid.*), situated on the Russian side of the border. Encouraged by his contacts with Big Diomeders, Hoyer expanded his activities even further on to the Siberian mainland. In the spring of 1923, accompanied by a small entourage he arrived in Naukan, where he reportedly was very well received by the acting governor, Fyodor Karaev. Karaev is said to have granted an approval to Hoyer's plans in turning the Naukan Native people to Christianity. We will never know how the undertaking would have turned out, if not for the unexpected incident described in this report from *The Nome Nugget*:

When spring arrived, Mr. Hoyer's party went to the mainland of Siberia going to East Cape. Difficulties were encountered due to ice conditions but a safe landing was accomplished. At New Oskum [Naukan], near East Cape, is what is likely the largest Eskimo village in the world, and until recently it was uncontaminated by whites, even traders failed to find a foot hold there. The Natives lived in well constructed homes and were well satisfied in their isolation. Now the Soviet has sent representatives into their country and the village has been overrun by them, everything is under Russian domination, showing that the Soviet government is reaching the outposts of the Russian possessions. [...] Governor Kariëff [Karaev] was very friendly to the missionaries and took the party to his headquarters and treated them kindly. A military commander Colonel of the Soviet staff also met the party and invited them to come to Whalen [Uelen] for a visit. Mr. Hoyer compiled and was taken on a private dog sled. Governor Kariëff accompanied the party. The trip, while but 20 miles long, was a difficult one to accomplish as the way was rough and open water frequently encountered, but finally was accomplished without serious accident. Upon arrival at Whalen, Rev Hoyer was asked [about] his mission in Siberia and informed that the missionaries came to teach the principles of Christianity and not Churchanity. This met with the approval of the Russians and Hoyer was told to proceed as he thought fit. While at Whalen news was brought that a Russian at New Oskum had been killed and the party was requested to return to the village. When Mr. Hoyer returned to the village, he learned that one of the Soviet officers had taken exception to a certain remark that reflected upon the Soviet regime and had shot and killed a fellow officer. The shooting occurred at the front door of the building where Mr. and Mrs. Earnest were staying and the murdered man fell at the very feet of Mrs. Earnest. An experience that certainly discouraged further missionary work for the lady (Anonymous 1923: 2).

The Swedish-born Nils Frederik Højjer was not someone to give up easily. After having spent many years as a missionary in different parts of the Russian Empire, Højjer saw the Bering Strait as his "back door" option to enter the country he was obsessed with (Rodli 1999: 50). After the incident reported by *The Nome Nugget*, he seemingly made several more attempts to gain a foothold in Siberia, until he died in November of 1926 as a result of a shipwreck off the Seward Peninsula (*ibid.*: 137). In September of 1923, Gustav Nyseter—a Norwegian missionary who with his wife Laura manned the Lutheran post on Little Diomed Island for most of the 1920s—was brought to Naukan by Højjer in order to prepare and winterise a house the latter had rented (*ibid.*: 79-80). Nyseter remained in Naukan for several weeks, until mid-October, when he was picked up by Højjer and returned to Little Diomed. The house

Nyseter had prepared for missionary activities seemingly never served that purpose; instead, it was used to house a Russian school teacher a few years later (*ibid.*: 131).

As far as we know, this was the end of the short-lived Lutheran mission at East Cape and the end of any official missionary contact between Alaska and Chukotka until the 1990s. However, it was most likely not the end of all religious contacts across Bering Strait. The Lutherans left Little Diomed in the 1930s, about the time when Father Lafortune (Renner 1979), the Catholic *umialik*<sup>5</sup> of King Island, established a temporary mission in an old house on the island. In 1936, the Catholic priest Tom Cunningham started his missionary work there on a permanent basis. Cunningham's biographer, Louis Renner, writes:

He did not limit his convert-making zeal to Little Diomed, for from the time he arrived, he looked across to Big Diomed and the Siberian mainland with a view to proselytising there as well. During the 1930s there was still a fair amount of contact between the Eskimos of the two Diomedes and the Siberian coast, and just one month after his arrival, Cunningham joined the Little Diomed men on a trading trip to Big Diomed because he needs some cloth to make a curtain to hang in front of the altar he had recently built for his new church. "It seems ironical," he noted in the diary, "buying cloth in a Soviet store for decoration inside a Catholic Church." When Big Diomeders came to Little Diomed, they always visited Cunningham and "were very friendly and sociable." He made his first contact with Siberians through the Big Diomeders. In January 1937, according to his diary, "Some Siberians wintering on Big Diomed came here. All visited me and I took the opportunity to instruct them a little. They are all warned against anything to do with religion" (Renner 1985: 33).

Seemingly, Siberians were well aware of the church and the priest on Little Diomed. Alimbek Dobriev (Lavrentiya, August 1995, taped interview), who was in the joint border guard and KGB team for visitors' clearance confirmed that, before departure, Siberian travellers were instructed not to bring back "objects of religious worship." In addition to a variety of other objects, such as firearms, ammunition, and alcohol, the instructions also contained a strong warning against venereal diseases (Golovko and Schweitzer 2004: 114-115). Remarkably, today's residents of Little Diomed are quite certain that no priests ever travelled from their island to Big Diomed or Siberia. The main evidence to the contrary comes from Cunningham's letters and diaries. In one of his letters, he even contends that he was arrested by Soviet officers on Big Diomed in 1937:

Last summer [1937], June 22<sup>nd</sup> to be exact, I was arrested over there by some Soviet officers (whites) who happened to be making an official visit to the island. They had a gun on me before I could even think of my revolver, and they held me to take me to the mainland. The Eskimos who were in the boat with me immediately armed themselves with rifles and harpoons and surrounded the house where I was held, and threatened to shoot every Russian in sight unless I were released immediately. At what I thought was a good moment, I made a dive for a Russian, gun and all, and got out the door. The Eskimos then surrounded me, and

<sup>5</sup> *Umialik* means 'boat captain' in Inupiaq; the same root as the Central Siberian Yupik *umiilek* and Naukan Yupik *umialek* which means 'strong person,' 'boat captain,' 'rich person,' 'boss,' 'leader.'

we all kept the officers in their own jail till we were ready to go. It was exciting, for a while, but I admit I was scared (Renner 1985: 38).

Cunningham certainly was prone to exaggeration. For example, in another letter he contends that Soviet authorities had put out a 1,000 rubles reward for his head (Renner 1985:38). However overdrawn Cunningham's portrayal of his own activities may be, it is not unreasonable to assume that some form of missionary input still reached across Bering Strait until the end of the 1930s.

### ***Shamanic practices***

Traditionally, Naukan Yupik shamanism shared some basic characteristics with Inuit shamanism, as well as with the shamanic traditions of the neighbouring Chukchi. The healing of the sick, as well as predicting hunting conditions and hunting luck, were the prime functions of shamans who could be either male or female. There was a certain tendency that strong shamans would reappear over generations within the same family groups (Tein 1994). Most important for our purposes was the fact that shamanistic practices had an interethnic quality. For example, Chukchi shamans would invariably be invited to perform their services while visiting Naukan. There was also a long-standing tradition of shamanic competitions, conducted at interethnic seasonal gathering places.

For most of the 1920s and during the early 1930s, shamanism continued to be openly practised on both sides of the Bering Strait. With the arrival of the first Christian missionaries at the turn of the 20th century, shamanic activities in Alaska began falling into a decline. However, even as late as 1938, according to Renner (1985: 39-40), Father Cunningham was reportedly fighting a losing battle with a famous wandering shaman named Azikazik. Still, at the time when the anti-shamanism campaign was well underway in Alaska, Chukotka shamans continued to practice largely without obstacles. The situation changed dramatically in the 1930s, when the Soviet authorities began to aggressively combat religious activities on the whole, which in Chukotka meant persecution of those involved in shamanic activities. In contrast to missionaries, the Soviets did not make sincere attempts to "convert" the shamans: they either had to renounce their vocation or ended up in the Gulag system. Incidentally, one of the practitioners mentioned by Yaken, Nunegnilan, "was imprisoned before the war for missionary activities" (Nina Akuken, Anadyr, July 1995, taped interview).

### ***Contacts between Native peoples and non-Native newcomers***

Contrary to what the *Nome Nugget* had to report in 1923, Naukan was anything but "uncontaminated by whites" by 1920. Although hardly any non-Native peoples had taken up permanent residence there before the 1920s, Naukan had become used since the mid-19th century to intensive seasonal interactions with American-based whalers and, later, traders (while interactions with Russian Cossacks and traders reach back to the 17th century). During the early years of the 20th century, Naukan and its

surroundings could easily be mistaken for an American colony: in addition to Chukchi, the lingua franca was English or an English-based pidgin picked up from the whalers, and according to the digger/adventurer August Masik (1935: 184), there was no Russian but only American and Japanese money in circulation in the early 1920s. While the 1920s and 1930s brought big changes for Naukan and the Chukchi Peninsula, they marked the shift from one colonial context to another (that is from American to Soviet) and should not be mistaken for initial experiences of culture contact with Euro-Americans. During the 1920s, this shift was more gradual than abrupt, as the emerging Soviet Union tried to take control of its eastern frontiers. The pace accelerated during the 1930s (due to collectivisation, purges of shamans, etc.) and the area was under tight dictatorial control by the onset of World War II<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the late 1920s and early 1930s referenced in Yaken's narrative were stressful times for Naukan residents—because of the forced reorientation of social, economic and cultural ties—but they were also times when local initiative and creativity had not yet been entirely crushed by the totalitarian state.

## Discussion

The overall evidence seems to confirm that, in the early decades of the 20th century, the Indigenous residents of Chukotka became aware of the existence of churches and priests or pastors on the other side of the Bering Strait. Obviously, due to the novelty and, at times, superficiality of their experiences with Christianity, neither Siberian Yupik nor Chukchi people had a deep understanding of the spiritual contents of these new religions. Still, they clearly took note of the different religious traditions they encountered, comparing the different practices and forming their own opinions about them. It should be emphasised that neither primary nor secondary sources offer any evidence of Chukotka residents being baptised or attending services during their stays on Little Diomedé. The present-day Little Diomedé elders recall that their relatives and guests from the Russian side showed little curiosity toward the church. At the same time, it appears that while few Christian missionaries reached Chukotka in person, the nearby presence of Catholic and Protestant parishes (albeit beyond the national border) did not go unnoticed. Christian influence diffusing from Alaska to Chukotka was highly idiosyncratic, and its impact was not too profound. Having adopted certain visual aspects of Christian worship, some residents of Naukan (and possibly other Chukotkan communities)<sup>7</sup> initiated a new religious movement. Notably, this emergence carried a significant appeal, according to Yaken, who recalled that approximately one third of the village's population was attending the services of the Naukan "priests."

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<sup>6</sup> Despite a long period of Soviet propaganda and a unified system of school education, some of our interviewees in 1995 were confident that "Soviet power was established when the war began" (Zinaida Semenchuk, untaped interview, Anadyr', 1995).

<sup>7</sup> According to Igor Krupnik (pers. comm., 2005), a similar phenomenon may have also emerged in the coastal village of Yanrakynnot.



Can the Naukan movement be understood as a “revitalisation movement”? We find that it fits this profile in a number of respects. It was certainly a reactionary phenomenon, arising in the context of the intense enforcement of social transition guided by the dominant culture that, together with the Soviet policies, was brought to Chukotka by Russian newcomers. The social distress experienced by the Naukan community in the 1920s and 1930s was triggered by a wide array of changes, which the Soviet authorities used to implement their new social order. Many of these measures had devastating effects on the Indigenous residents. The economic reform of collectivisation, for example, together with a strict ban on the possession of firearms, caused a rupture in food procurement, division of labour, and distribution of natural resources. The installation of a border-zone regime nearly eliminated the social exchanges and trading partnerships between the two sides of Bering Strait. Formal schooling, conducted in Russian, inflicted Native language loss, while preventing the children from assisting their families with household activities, further widening the generation gap. Soviet efforts also included fervent anti-shamanism campaigns, the implementation of new hierarchies and systems of rewards (including such notions as “shock-worker,” “leadership flag” and “honorable certificate”), and sanitary regulations geared toward policing dwelling cleanliness and personal hygiene. Altogether, both the rate and the magnitude of the Soviet-administered changes were colossal. Different innovations were undoubtedly variably received by different segments of the Indigenous population, likely creating some social divisions within the communities. What is important, however, is that the Soviet ideology and all its consequences were directly associated with the presence of Russians in the Chukotkan villages, which might explain the strong anti-Russian overtones of the Naukan movement.

Yet the Christian elements exhibited by the “priests” of East Cape are not entirely consistent with the categorical exclusion of Russian or Russified elements that the “priests” themselves were proclaiming. We can now distinguish three potential sources of Christian influence, possibly pertaining to the syncretistic phenomena that Yaken’s narrative portrays: Russian Orthodox (1890-1910); Lutheran (early 1920s); and Catholic (1930s). The Naukan Yupik anthropologist Tasyan Tein, who to our knowledge is the only scholar to ever devote a single paragraph of writing to the Naukan movement, attributes its manifestation to the work of American missionaries, interpreting their efforts as an anti-Soviet campaign (Tein 1994: 124). However, a number of features mentioned by Yaken (*e.g.*, long black gowns with big sleeves, crosses worn across the chest) are much more reminiscent of Russian Orthodox priests than of Lutheran pastors. The timeframe of the testimony also suggests that the Naukan movement reflects primarily Russian-Orthodox and Lutheran qualities as Catholic influence in the Bering Strait area appeared after the late 1920s/early 1930s, the most likely point of reference of Yaken’s descriptions. Thus, it might make more sense to interpret the Naukan movement as a fusion of different European and Native religious traditions, arising at the temporal and spatial juncture of competing socio-political ideologies.

As the Chukchi Peninsula was gradually transformed into a Russian/Soviet domain, both the appearance and disappearance in the early 1920s of a new (*i.e.*

American) liturgical approach to a Christian god vaguely familiar to Naukan residents were equally sudden. Stemming from neither an Indigenous worldview, nor from that of the colonial culture making its way to the Bering Strait coast of Chukotka, this approach may have appeared as the one standing in balanced opposition to the two clashing systems. At the same time, this new form of spirituality, albeit foreign and only superficially understood, was not entirely alien to the people of Naukan: it was gaining ground in the Native communities situated within close physical and social proximity, among their relatives and friends living on the other side of Bering Strait. Taken together, these features could have presented a creative outlet to some of the Naukan residents for coping not only with the psychological stresses caused by cognitive incompatibilities previously connected with the rise of revitalisation movements (*cf.* Balzer 1999; Wallace 1956, 1969, 1970), but also with the social ruptures brought on by the radical transformation to the local ways of life. Yet because of its fragmented nature this plausible path to creative resistance could not, on its own, suffice as a holistic spiritual expression and was therefore integrated with forms of shamanic practice, as well as elements appropriated from the Russian approach to Christianity introduced at an earlier time.

Acknowledging that the phenomena at hand exhibit a number of characteristics evocative of a revitalisation movement, we nevertheless feel compelled to offer a word of caution in labelling the Naukan movement as such. For one, the available information is just too limited. While several of our interlocutors made nebulous references to the existence of Naukan “priests,” Yaken’s narrative was the only one providing at least some insight into the scope of their practices and perspectives. Secondly, as far as we are able to decipher from Yaken’s testimony, the organisational structure of the Naukan movement, although not completely egalitarian, did not include a strong charismatic leader, typically found in revitalisation movements. Such a leadership position may have been in the process of emerging (perhaps in the person of one of the “priests” who—in the words of Yaken—was also a shaman), but did not have a chance to establish itself fully before the entire movement began to dissolve. In this connection, we can observe an analogy between the emergence of Naukan priests and other short-term movements arising elsewhere in Siberia and the Russian Far East, which Balzer (1999: 98) categorises as “aborted revitalisation attempts.” In contrast to the large-scale development of new religious forms such as the Melanesian “cargo cults” (*e.g.*, Lawrence 1964; Lindstrom 1993; Trompf 1990; Worsley 1968), the Ghost Dance movement of the Plains (Mooney 1965[1896]; Smoak 1999) or nativist prophet movements in eastern North America (Cave 2006), the Naukan movement was interrupted prior to gaining full momentum, stamped out by the quickly advancing purges of Stalinist times, equally intolerant toward priests and shamans. As mentioned above, Nina Petrovna Akuken, whom we interviewed in Anadyr in 1995, recalled that her stepfather Nunegnilan, one of the Naukan “priests,” was incarcerated shortly before World War II for what she called “proselytising activities.”

In the end, it is not the most important issue which anthropological label we attach to the Naukan movement. For us, it is much more important to use this case study to call for a careful re-reading of the colonial histories of northern Indigenous peoples. As

was mentioned above, religious movements in the circumpolar North have not been very well documented. Up to the present day, colonial histories of northern Indigenous peoples all too often are constructed as narratives of victimisation, without taking into account the creative solutions with which Northerners in Russia and elsewhere countered periods of rapid social change. Movements such as the one reported for Naukan, no matter whether “aborted” by dominant outside forces or not, need to enter the documentary record of the cultural history of northern Indigenous communities.

## Acknowledgements

The project “Traveling Between Continents” was financed by the U.S. National Park Service. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Conference on Religious Movements at the European University in St Petersburg, Russia in 2002, and at the 30th Annual Meeting of the Alaskan Anthropological Association in Fairbanks, Alaska, in 2003. An earlier Russian version was published in Golovko and Schweitzer (2006). Dr. Sveta Yamin-Pasternak provided valuable editorial assistance; as always, the shortcomings are ours.

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